

AGING OUT

The Future of Foster Children

INTRODUCTION

Many teenage former foster children now live on the streets. Most do not have the skills necessary to make the transition to a productive, independent adulthood. During their time in foster care, some teens have moved as many as nine times or more from one placement to another, from one school to another, from one social worker to another, preventing them from connecting with caring adults or receiving either a high school diploma or a GED, according to professionals who work with these youth. In San Luis Obispo County approximately twenty-five 18 year olds leave the foster care system each year. (Appendix C, #2)

Is this county providing the needed help and support former foster youth must have to become self-sufficient and responsible citizens, wage earners, and productive members of society? Does San Luis Obispo County have the resources to meet this challenge?

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code §925 states: “The grand jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county including those operations, accounts, and records of any special legislative district or other district in the county created pursuant to state law for which the officers of the county are serving in their ex officio capacity as officers of the districts.”

California Penal Code §928 states: “Every grand jury may investigate and report upon the needs of all county officers in the county, including the abolition or creation of offices and the equipment for, or the method or system of performing the duties of, the several offices. Such investigation and report shall be conducted selectively each year. The grand jury shall cause a copy of such report to be transmitted to each member of the board of supervisors of the county.”

California Penal Code §933.5 states: “A grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any special-purpose assessing or taxing district located wholly or partly in the county

or the local agency formation commission in the county, and, in addition to any other investigatory powers granted by this chapter, may investigate and report upon the method or system of performing the duties of such district or commission.”

ORIGIN

As a result of a tour of the El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility and our visits to Juvenile Hall and the community schools, the Grand Jury met young people, many of whom we learned had been in foster care for most of their lives. These youth did not have the ability to make it on their own, and many had become involved in substance abuse and other criminal behavior. Some youth considered themselves lucky just to have “three meals and a cot.” This prompted our inquiry into what resources are presently available in this county to help young people who are aging out of foster care.

METHOD

The following agencies were interviewed by the 2005-2006 San Luis Obispo Grand Jury:

- County Department of Social Services, Independent Living Program (ILP)
- Family Care Network (FCN), Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP)
- Transitions Mental Health Association
- Cuesta College Independent Living Program (ILP)
- County Mental Health Youth Services
- County Probation Department
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Voices for Children Program
- San Luis Obispo County Foster Parent Association
- County Office of Education, Alternative School Program
- Cuesta College, ILP Employment Services
- Cuesta College, ILP California Youth Connection (CYC)
- Aspira Foster and Family Services
- Tri-Counties Regional Services
- Central Coast Family Center
- Los Padres Family Services

We also interviewed a former foster teen and a retired probation officer and reviewed literature addressing this problem. (Appendices B and C)

NARRATIVE

Independent Living Program (ILP)

The Grand Jury investigated the support systems available to help youth ages 16 to 21 transition from foster care to independent living. In this county, the ILP is a collaborative effort of the Department of Social Services, Transitions Mental Health, the Probation Department and Cuesta College. Social workers and probation officers refer teens to ILP after they reach 15 _ years of age. Transitions Mental Health provides extensive case management services for all ILP youth, including assistance with the Transitional Independent Living Plan and connecting youth to significant others.

This program at Cuesta College offers classes in basic living skills such as housekeeping, banking, personal hygiene, and budgeting. They also provide career counseling, vocational training, employment placement and financial aid. Computer classes, auto maintenance and job fairs are also offered. Teens learn how to identify their support systems and how to identify role models that will help them make good choices. Classes are held in the evenings between 5-8 pm. Teens are given \$15 for each class and dinner as an incentive for attending classes. Teens can contact their social worker, probation officer or ILP worker regarding eligibility.

Caregivers

A critical component of meeting the challenge facing emancipating teens is the essential cooperation and support a responsible caregiver or group home staff person may provide. Support can come from the dedication of foster parents, the stability of close relatives or the professional guidance of teachers, social workers, probation officers, mentors or mental health workers. Some working teens use their employers or coworkers as role models. Forging connections with adults can make the difference between success or a future of emptiness and depression.

Housing

Housing is a difficult problem for youth who will no longer be eligible for public funds. The Transitional Housing Placement Program (THPP) was created to provide youth ages 16-18 the opportunity to live semi-independently in the community. This program is currently available for less than a dozen teens through Family Care Network (FCN).

Homeless shelters are a limited option for young people. There are too few shelters and too many homeless families. Shelter staff members confirm approximately 2400 people are homeless in this county, and 1/3 of these are under 21. It is not uncommon to see teens living under bridges, sleeping in cars and creek beds, or dealing drugs. Many are just “on the run” until they exhaust their resources. Some teens, both male and female, turn to prostitution and other crimes to survive. Some run the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Young women often become pregnant soon after leaving foster care.

Academic and Vocational Education

Besides living skills, academic and vocational education is an important element teens need to plan for their future. A high school diploma or GED can be the doorway to a career with the help of college scholarships and other financial aid. ILP workers provide a wealth of information to foster teens who want to improve themselves and broaden their opportunities. Academic courses are available at Cuesta College through the ILP.

Financial Aid

Eligibility for MediCal, Food Stamps, CalWORKs, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and other programs for teen moms, as well as one-time housing allowances up to \$800, are available through the Department of Social Services. Former foster teens can apply for college scholarships based on need and academic readiness by working with their case worker or ILP worker.

Transportation

Transportation is a problem for youth who live in rural areas. Teens usually have no access to a car, and there is limited bus service. ILP classes are held at Cuesta College - with some classes

at the North Campus - making it difficult for youth who want to participate. Although there is van service for regular classes, no transportation is available for special events. Fortunately, there are a few dedicated ILP workers, responsible foster parents, and relative caregivers who will drive teens to and from their classes.

Advocacy

California Youth Connection (CYC), a statewide advocacy group, consists of current and former foster youth who work together on local and statewide legislation affecting their lives. This program was developed to give teens the opportunity to have an active voice in government by participating in legislative sessions in Sacramento. Ten teens from San Luis Obispo County are currently working on a solution to housing needs.

Work-Related Programs for Physically and Mentally Challenged Youth

North County Industries (NCI) and Achievement House are agencies employing developmentally disabled and mentally ill young people who work at daily jobs. Some live in private residences while others live in licensed board-and-care homes. A private agency, Alpha Academy, operates Thousand Hills Pet Resort, a unique operation that offers a few young men, ages 18-25, the opportunity to work with animals and live in a residential setting.

The Transition Partnership Program (TPP) is a contract partnership between the California Department of Rehabilitation and local education agencies. TPP provides students with disabilities the tools and support necessary to effectively transition from school to competitive employment. (Appendix C, #1)

Mental Health Issues

Research studies of former foster teens have shown these young people are prone to depression, post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, attention-deficit disorder and even schizophrenia. Some need ongoing treatment, medications and a place to stay which includes daily supervision. In this county, there is a need for this type of facility.

Blended funding projects have been successfully employed in the State of Washington to commingle funds from different agencies to provide services to youth with multiple needs, i.e. mental health problems, substance abuse and homelessness. (Appendix B, #6) According to sources at the Department of Social Services, the County of San Luis Obispo has been operating such programs for about eight years. However, it is not known whether such programs target youth who are leaving the system with multiple problems which interfere with their ability to support themselves.

Programs Specifically Designed For Emancipated Youth

One solution for housing youth 18-25 is a grant-funded program that combines housing with mentoring. Transitional Housing Placement Program-Plus (THPP-Plus) is a program to provide independent living to aging out youth with oversight in the form of on-site residential advisors. The THPP-Plus is a state program that is not yet available in San Luis Obispo County, although the county is on record in support of current legislation that would permit the county to implement the program.

CONCLUSION

Young adults emerging from foster care have little or no family support and even fewer personal resources. Many leave the system without jobs, stable homes, savings or adults they can count on. Once teens are emancipated, financial aid to their former caregiver is ended. Given the sudden withdrawal of support and the many problems these young people face, it is both practical and cost-effective to provide adequate housing and services to youth to facilitate this transition.

Even in stable families, some 18 year olds are barely equipped to deal with the demands of today's society without support. "Forging connections with adults who will stick with them through the ups and downs of growing up becomes a necessary survival skill...no one at age 19, 20 or 21 can live without adults," says Steve Cohen, Director, Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Many former foster teens are either homeless, or because of substance abuse or other issues, are now in jails, prisons or mental institutions.

Finding 2: Many former foster teens have not acquired the skills or the abilities needed to get a job.

Finding 3: Many former foster teens do not have a support group or relatives to return to or

Finding 4: Many former foster teens have difficulty traveling to Cuesta College to take advantage of the programs offered.

Finding 5: Many former foster girls become pregnant soon after leaving foster care.

Finding 6: Many former foster teens have severe mental health problems that interfere with their ability to hold a job, find housing and support themselves.

Finding 7: Many former foster teens turn to prostitution or other crimes to get money for food and rent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: A task force should be formed to provide leadership in addressing the problem of housing for teens aging out of foster care. This task force could be instrumental in seeking grants for residential living in individual or shared apartments with resident advisors. (See Appendix A, Resources) (Finding 1)

Recommendation 2: The Community and Court Schools should be expanded to include programs for youth, emphasizing vocational training and marketable skills. (Finding 2)

Recommendation 3: At least six months prior to emancipation, a mandatory exit plan should be created for each youth to follow which identifies specific support people and local resources. Foster parents need both training and incentives to encourage them to participate in these exit plans. (Findings 3, 4 & 5)

Recommendation 4: ILP classes should be held at convenient times and locations throughout the county. (Finding 4)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

- **The San Luis Obispo County Mental Health Department, Due 08/08/06 (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 and Recommendation 1)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services, Due 08/08/06 (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 and Recommendations 1 & 3)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Probation Department, Due 08/08/06 (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 and Recommendation 1)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors, Due 09/05/06 (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 and Recommendations 1 & 3)**
- **The Cuesta College Independent Living Program, Due 08/08/06 (Finding 4 and Recommendation 4)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, Due 08/08/06 (Finding 2 and Recommendation 2)**

APPENDIX A

Resources Online:

1. Youth Communications www.youthcomm.org
2. Lighthouse Youth Services www.lvs.org
3. National Resources Center for Youth Services <http://youthlifeskills.nreys.ou.edu/yls.htm>
4. Work Appreciation for Youth www.childrevillage.org
5. The Annie E. Casey Foundation www.aecf.org
6. Child Welfare League of America www.CWLA.org
7. HUD Resources for Youth Leaving Foster Care www.hud.gov/offices/pih/grants
8. Common Ground Community www.commonground.org

APPENDIX B

Articles Online:

1. Almost Home, Kendra Hurley www.nhi.org.online/issues/125fostercare
2. Aging Out of Foster Care www.childrensaidsociety.org
3. Aging Out of Foster Care www.pbs.org/newshour/fostercare
4. Supporting Youth Aging Out www.voicesforamericaschildren.org
5. Cuesta College Foster & Kinship Care www.cuesta.org/community/econdev/fce
6. Legislative Report on Blended Funding
Dept. of Social & Health Services,
Olympia, Washington, 12/2001 www1.dshs.wa.gov
7. Children of the Night www.childrenofthenight.org

APPENDIX C

Books and Periodicals:

1. California Mental Health Directors Association: Children's System of Care/ Transition Age Youth (TAY) Resource Guide, April 29th, 2005.
2. San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services Child Welfare Services, Third Quarter Report, 2005.
3. "Life Skills Knowledge: A Survey of Foster Adolescents", Edmund Mech, et al., *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1994, Vol. 16, 3-4, pg.181-200.
4. *Moving In: Ten Successful Independent/Transitional Living Programs*, Mark Kroner, ed, Northwest Media, 2001.